

I would rather build a park where the plain people of Virginia can spend a pleasant outing and find pleasure and recreation close to nature, than to build a great church or endow a cathedral. —Will Carson

While the Virginia State Parks system was authorized in 1926 by an act of the General Assembly, it was not until 1936 that Virginia opened its first six state parks. In 2006, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) managed more than 66,000 acres of state parks lands, which had grown in size to include 34 state parks and associated historic and natural sites. Many existing sites have expanded in acreage and several have received historic or natural area preserve designation. In addition, as of January of 2007, DCR had acquired and land-banked property for five new state parks. Attendance at Virginia State Parks in 2006 exceeded seven million people, as compared to 91,000 in 1936 and 6.3 million in 2000. The following discussions detail the parks system's role in meeting the Commonwealth's demand for outdoor recreation opportunities and open space.

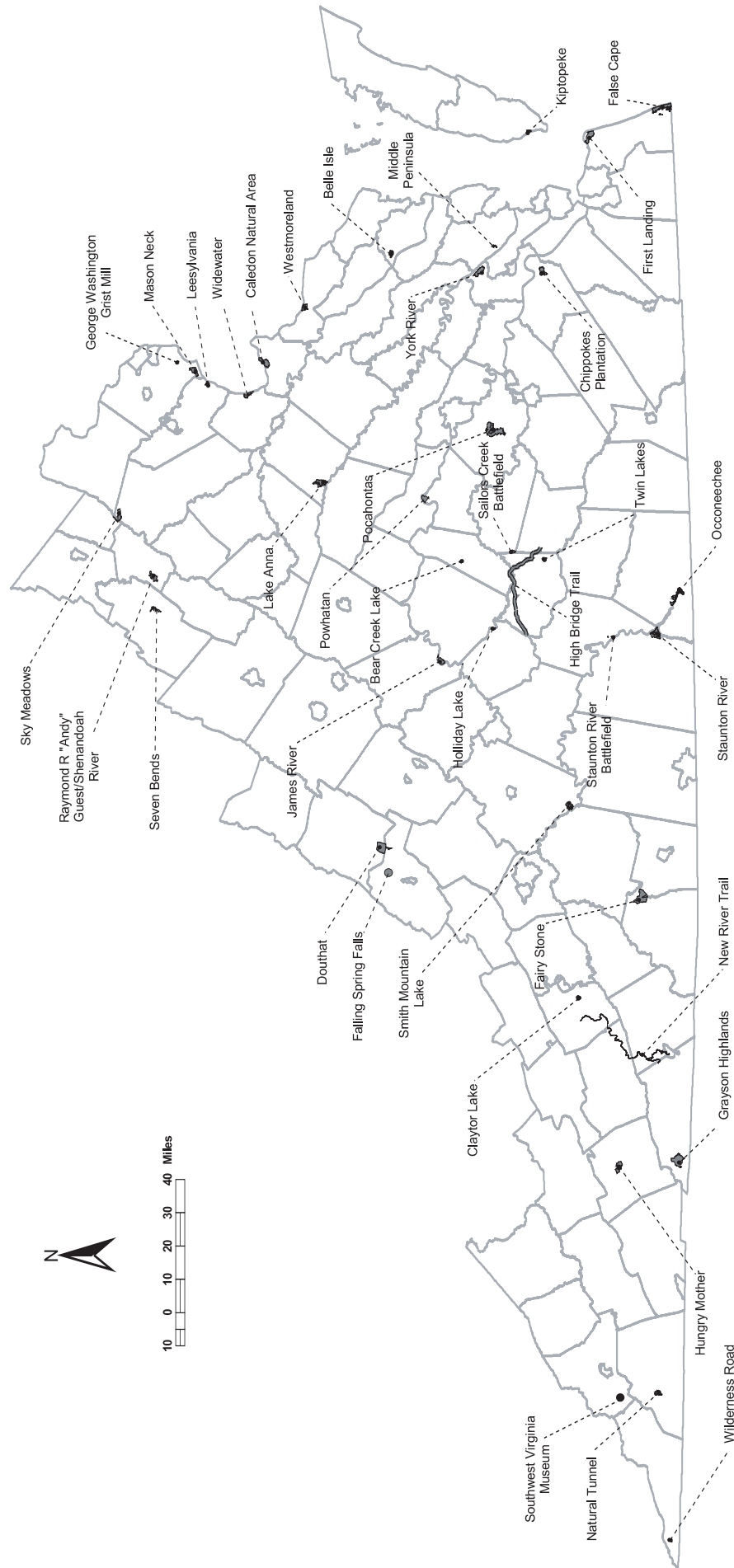
Findings

- Attendance at Virginia State Parks has continued to increase, exceeding seven million people in 2006. Most recent estimates are that approximately 40 percent of visitors come from outside the Commonwealth.
- State parks visitors provide an estimated \$157 million to the state's tourism industry. This is particularly important for many of the rural communities in which several state parks are located.
- From 2002 to 2006, state parks acreage increased by 6,900 acres, including land acquired for five future parks: High Bridge, Powhatan, Middle Peninsula, Seven Bends and Widewater state parks. There is a need for an additional 12,000 acres of park land to meet the standard for state park acreage based on the population projection for 2010.



Family tent camping. Photo by DCR.

- According to the 2006 *Virginia Outdoors Survey* (VOS), the top three reasons the public supports Virginia's State Parks system are because they conserve natural resources, provide people places to explore and enjoy nature and their cultural heritage, and provide places for walking, running and other activities that contribute to a healthy lifestyle.
- According to the 2006 VOS, the top rated facilities or activities that should be provided by state parks are trails, visitor centers, campgrounds, nature, historic and educational programs, play grounds, and water access for swimming, fishing and boating.
- In 2006, Fairy Stone, First Landing (formerly known as Seashore), Hungry Mother, Staunton River and Westmoreland state parks were listed on the state and national registers of historic places for their significance as Civilian Conservation Corps parks. Douthat State Park was listed in 1986.
- Since 2002, Virginia's governors and General Assembly have provided funding for 88 additional state parks positions. These positions have helped to address ongoing staffing needs associated with new facilities and responsibilities.
- As a result of the proceeds provided by the 2002 State Parks and Natural Areas General Obligation Bond (GOB), the number of parks with new or additional cabins or family lodges will increase from 11 to 18 parks; 23 parks will offer camping, including seven new campgrounds, and improvements or expansions to eight existing campgrounds; six parks will have equestrian campgrounds; 11 parks will have new or renovated visitor centers ; two parks will have new meeting facilities; and three parks will have new or renovated picnic areas and shelters (see Map IX-3).
- The 2002 GOB also provided \$2.8 million for enhancing and improving trails across the parks system. In 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding was established between the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) and DCR. IMBA has provided assistance in trail design and with training on the development and construction of sustainable trails. In 2007, Virginia State Parks had more than 490 miles of trail, including four parks with a combined 106 miles of rail-trail.
- DCR leadership made a commitment to use bond proceeds to construct new buildings using environmentally-friendly designs and materials. Accordingly, Wilderness Road State Park's visitor center is the first state-owned building to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. DCR has been recognized for this green building and currently has several additional park facilities in planning that will be designed to meet LEED standards.
- State parks are increasingly being used as venues for meaningful outdoor education opportunities. More than 12,000 interpretive and educational programs with approximately 241,000 attendees were offered in 2006, compared to 6,800 programs with 190,000 attendees in 2002.
- *Virginia's State Parks... Your Backyard Classroom* consists of SOL-based, teacher-led science and social studies activities for kindergarten through 12th grade and is available in three versions. The first version was for the Chesapeake Bay area parks and was produced in 1990 and revised in 1999. Versions have now been produced for the Piedmont and Mountain regions parks.
- Established in 2002, the Virginia State Parks Youth Conservation Corps was piloted at six state parks. By 2006, 19 parks were offering programs with 195 participants ranging in age from 14 to 17 years old.
- Virginia's population is becoming more culturally diverse. This increased diversity has led to changes in park management to address the need for multi-lingual staff and information, and an understanding of cultural differences as it relates to experiencing outdoor recreation and park usage.
- Volunteers remain an important source of alternative support and labor. Volunteer hours in state parks have increased by 23 percent since 2000, totaling more than 142,000 hours in 2006. Established in 1997, one of the key volunteer citizen organizations is the Virginia Association for Parks, which fosters the development of local support groups for state and federal parks in Virginia.
- In 2006, Virginia State Parks added cabins to its internet reservation system. The number of internet cabin reservations increased from 770 during the first three months of 2006, to 3,400 during that same time period in 2007. The internet reservation process allows potential customers to browse availability and make decisions on their own time and at their own convenience, as well as reduces the need for additional reservation staff.
- Operational funding is drawn from a combination of general funds and park-generated revenues (primarily user fees). Park-generated fees have increased to approximately 40 percent of the overall funding of operations. However, the ability to increase fees is reaching a threshold for users and will be limited by the number of revenue generating facilities and pro-



grams that are available. Additional fees will be generated as new facilities are provided. Some opportunities exist to develop new activities and offerings through the development of special events and group activities. A stable source of funding is needed to cover the full operational costs of the system.

- Requested by the General Assembly and conducted by state university researchers on behalf of DCR, a 2004 study showed that state parks fees continue to be comparable to fees charged for like facilities in the private sector.

Recommendations

- Although increases in funds and staff have been achieved in recent years, continued efforts are needed to achieve the full rebenchmarking of staff and operational funds for existing state parks.
- Newly acquired state parks should be land-banked until adequate funding is provided for development, operations and staffing. Funding for the five future parks should be phased so that all are open and operational by 2012, which would be 10 years after the passage of the 2002 GOB.
- State park resource management plans should be updated based on the natural, cultural and historic resources of the park, and management objectives should be established to ensure those resources are enhanced and protected for future generations. Resource management plans should be developed for the five future parks, and existing plans updated in harmony with the five-year review of park master plans.
- To meet the high demand for trails within state parks, increased efforts are needed to provide for more and varied types of trails, while minimizing the potential degradation to the natural and cultural resources of the site.
- With the strong national emphasis on the “nature-deficit disorder” plaguing the country’s youth, DCR should coordinate with other agencies, organizations and groups to expand interpretive and educational programming offered in the parks and encourage greater park utilization through outreach to schools and surrounding communities.
- To meet the challenges of changing demographics of park users, Virginia State Parks should continue to explore new park management opportunities that will encourage and facilitate the safe enjoyment and protection of state parks resources and facilities by all visitors.

- Virginia State Parks should promote and expand the Youth Conservation Corps program so that it is offered in each state park during summer months.
- In addition to camping and cabins, Virginia State Parks should expand the opportunities for online reservations for other state parks facilities, program offerings and recreational activities.
- DCR should develop and install touch screen electronic information stations (kiosks) in all parks. The stations will provide virtual tours of trails, park information and maps, area amenities and other relevant park user information.
- DCR should develop master plans for new park sites and revise plans for parks with expanded acreage in accordance with the *Code of Virginia*. Plans should recommend structure design using sustainable and energy efficient construction methods, striving for LEED certification where possible.

Need for a state parks system

On June 15, 1936, in one day, Virginia opened an entire state parks system consisting of six parks that totaled nearly 19,000 acres. Facilities in those first six parks were developed by the Civilian Conservation Corp. The leaders of the movement to create a state parks system recognized the value to individuals and the communities around those parks. Three key reasons were identified for acquiring land for state parks: being in nature could serve as a tonic to the mind, body and spirit; the protection of significant natural and cultural resources for the enjoyment of future generations; and the park’s ability to serve as an economic engine to the community and region.

By 1965, the parks system had grown to include nine parks, three recreational areas, several historic sites and six natural areas. In that same year, the state released *Virginia’s Common Wealth*, its first comprehensive study of outdoor recreation. That study stated, “Virginia’s land and waters have abundantly nourished its citizens, in body and spirit, for nearly four centuries. To neglect these resources – to abandon their conservation – to let heedless exploitation consume them or remove them from the reach of the great majority of our citizens – is to sell their birthright for a mess of pottage. Once sold, it cannot be recovered.”

Virginia’s Common Wealth served as an evaluation of Virginians’ demand for outdoor recreation and an assessment of the state’s resources for meeting those demands. It stated that the parks system fell far short of meeting the demands of Virginia’s citizens and visitors.

State Parks

As recreational and open space needs increased over the years, Virginia State Parks have expanded and developed. In 2001, the parks received the National Gold Medal for excellence in the field of park and recreation administration and management by the National Sporting Goods Association's Sports Foundation, Inc. in cooperation with the National Recreation and Park Association. Today, the parks system continues to receive strong public support. In the 2006 VOS, 91 percent of responders agreed or strongly agreed that state parks are very important places to participate in outdoor recreation.

The following were identified as top three reasons for having a state parks system: conserving natural resources (61 percent); providing people places to explore and enjoy nature and their cultural resources (59 percent); and providing places for walking, running and other activities that contribute to a healthy lifestyle (54 percent). By 2006, the parks system had expanded to 39 state parks, historic sites and natural areas that encompassed more than 66,000 acres.

State parks planning and protection

The mission of the Virginia State Parks system is to conserve the natural, scenic, historic and cultural resources of the Commonwealth, and provide recre-

ational and educational opportunities consistent with the good stewardship of these lands, waters and facilities that leaves them unimpaired for future generations. This is accomplished through active cultural and natural resource management and by providing recreational facilities and programs that compliment these resources. It is also accomplished by limiting the development of the major state parks to only 15 percent to 20 percent of the total land area.

Maximizing the public's enjoyment of state park lands, while minimizing the impacts on the resources, requires careful planning. The department accomplishes this through the use of resource management and master plans. Such plans allow effective management of the natural and cultural resources while providing recreational opportunities for Virginians. These planning tools facilitate compatible facility development and recreational use tailored to the resource's capabilities and limitations.

A park's resource management plan and master plan are the basis for future park development. The components of a state park master plan are described in the *Code of Virginia*, § 10.200.1, state park master planning. Virginia is possibly the first state to legislatively require that its state parks have an adopted master plan prior to developing the property. To develop or



Twin Lakes State Park. Photo by DCR.

revise master plans over the five year timeframe, DCR developed an open planning process that provides multiple opportunities for public involvement and participation. The inventory information of the resource management plan is used to determine constraints on development or areas of interest that might be appropriate for trails, recreational facilities or program activities.

Funding and development

The key to successfully implementing a park resource management plan or master plan is to have the needed funding and staff to manage the resources and to construct and operate new and existing park facilities. The governor and General Assembly allocated funding for 88 additional state parks positions from 2005 to 2008. The new positions represent a significant step in rebenchmarking the parks system, taking into account new parks and new facilities that have been added with proceeds from the 1992 and 2002 General Obligation Bond packages. Even with these new positions, additional staff positions are needed to address increased operational needs to fully operate existing and new GOB facilities, as well as provide minimal staffing of newly acquired parks.

In November 2002, with 69 percent in favor, Virginians voted to expand and improve the parks system by approving the 2002 Parks and Natural Areas General Obligation Bond (GOB) Referendum. The referendum approved \$119 million for the acquisition of new state parks and natural area preserves, and 75 projects to provide additional facilities and upgrade infrastructure in existing state parks.

New developments as a result of the 2002 GOB included:

- Eleven new or renovated visitor centers.
- Ninety-six cabins in nine state parks, five of which did not have cabins.
- Nine campground loops in seven different parks, four of which did not have camping, totaling 245 new campsites.
- New equestrian areas in five state parks.
- Two parks with new meeting facilities.

These facilities required the development of miles of roads, utilities and associated parking lots. Thus, while much progress has been made in meeting development, staffing and operational needs, more needs to be done as the new parks and facilities are established. Efforts to rebenchmark the system should con-



Hiking in the State Park. Photo by DCR.

tinue and it remains a top priority for agency leadership working with the Commonwealth's elected officials.

Trails in state parks

Trails continue to receive the highest ratings of importance as an activity within the parks system. The Virginia State Parks system has more than 490 miles of trails. This includes four parks that have a combined 106 miles of rail-trail. The 2006 VOS asked how important it was for Virginia State Parks to provide certain facilities or activities. Three types of trails ranked in the top seven items in order of importance: hiking trails were first (94 percent support), bike trails were fourth (85 percent) and multi-use trails were rated seventh (82 percent). The state parks' *Your Comments Count* customer satisfaction survey also shows park hiking trails to have the highest overall rating of all surveyed activities. However, park visitors who respond to the survey also rank trails as the second highest priority for improvement, showing that while visitors greatly enjoy these trails, they also recognize that many still need maintenance and additional signage.

Through the 2002 GOB, more than \$2.8 million was identified for trail improvement projects in state parks. To ensure that the variety of trails offered are well maintained, training sessions have been provided and specialized equipment acquired. In 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding was established between the

International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) and DCR to encourage the development and construction of sustainable trails in Virginia State Parks. A component of this MOU was to conduct joint training sessions for state parks staff and local IMBA volunteers on current construction techniques for sustainable trails that require minimal maintenance.

Natural and cultural interpretation and education

A primary component of the Virginia State Parks mission is to provide educational opportunities consistent with good stewardship. Interpretative programs, exhibits and signage promote public understanding and support of that mission. State parks have long provided both personal and non-personal interpretive services in the form of programs, as well as interpretive exhibits and self-guided trails. In the 2006 VOS, 81 percent of respondents ranked nature, cultural, historic and educational programs as “important” or “very important.” During 2006, roughly 12,000 interpretive programs were delivered to more than 241,000 visitors, and 40,350 students attended 1,182 environmental education programs. The national movement to reconnect children with the natural world has cut across social, political and economic lines, making state parks a perfect venue for introducing children to the outdoors.

The historic and cultural resources of Virginia's State Parks create excellent opportunities for interpretation, education and special events. In 2006, the parks system celebrated its 70th anniversary. In conjunction with that celebration, five of the original six state parks, Fairy Stone, First Landing (formerly Seashore),

Hungry Mother, Staunton River and Westmoreland, were listed on the state and national registers of historic places for their historic significance as Civilian Conservation Corps parks. Douthat State Park had already been listed in 1986. The system also possesses significant Civil War sites, as well as two significant battlefields. In addition, numerous Native American sites have been documented at state parks. In 2007, Virginia State Parks hosted several events relating to the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown Settlement, including the re-enactment of the first coming ashore of the Virginia Company settlers at First Landing State Park in Virginia Beach.

A significant component of environmental education offerings is the program entitled, *Virginia's State Parks....Your Backyard Classroom*. Three geographically based versions are available covering the Chesapeake Bay, Piedmont and Mountain regions of the state. The program consists of teacher-led science and social studies activities, which incorporate Virginia's SOLs for grades kindergarten through 12, and is designed to accommodate educational programming at any of the parks. The general public and park visitors also show great support for nature and educational programs. The 2006 *Your Comments Count Customer Survey* ranked nature-related activities (educational programs and nature programs) as three of the top five highest rated activity areas. In the 2006 *Virginia Outdoors Survey*, visitor centers ranked second in importance (88 percent) as a facility that should be provided by state parks.

Through the 2002 Bond Referendum, DCR constructed or enhanced visitor centers in 11 state parks. Many of these visitor centers are designed with discovery centers that will further enhance educational opportunities within state parks. The Wilderness Road State Park visitor center was the first LEED certified facility within the parks system and the first state-owned building to achieve this distinction. DCR also set a goal to incorporate LEED components into all new visitor centers and obtain certification when possible.

Volunteerism

Volunteerism is vital to the support of state parks. Between 2000 and 2006, volunteer hours increased 23 percent with volunteers contributing more than 142,000 hours. AmeriCorps (the National Civilian Conservation Corps), college level alternative spring break groups and various camp host programs supplement volunteers who live near parks. State parks “friends” groups are vital in organizing volunteer efforts under park staff guidance. At the state level,



First Landing State Park Visitor Center with new kiosk information sponsored by Dominion. Photo by DCR.



Lake Anna State Park. Photo by DCR.

the Virginia Association for Parks (VAFP) is an organization that fosters the development of support groups for state and federal parks in Virginia. Since its establishment in 2000, the VAFP has focused its efforts on recruiting and training volunteers, as well as advocating for our state and national parks. Their efforts have assisted in the establishment of 29 support groups.

Community economic benefits and cooperative opportunities

State parks add to the overall quality of life in every community where they exist by attracting new businesses and tourists. Visitors to state parks have a significant impact on local economies, primarily to merchants and service providers in communities surrounding parks. It is estimated that state parks visitors add \$157 million to the state's economy. In addition, parks also contribute to the local economy through park spending and jobs.

State parks offer recreational opportunities and support facilities that provide local communities with a wide range of recreational and educational experiences. Opportunities exist to expand visitor services and facilities at state parks through fee-based programming, partnerships with private and public organizations and development initiatives. Examples include the annual Bay Seafood Festival at Belle Isle State

Park and the Chesapeake Bay Center at First Landing State Park, which is cooperatively managed by the City of Virginia Beach and the Aquarium and Marine Science Center. The Chesapeake Bay Center is unique in that the facility is staffed by the City and provides self guided exhibits and information about the park and ecotourism opportunities within Virginia Beach. The Aquarium offers hands on experiences for area students and visitors with the Bay lab and education programs.

Revenue generation

Revenues generated by park visitation are an increasingly important source of funding. All park revenues are returned to the state parks system and are used for operations, maintenance and equipment. Over the past five years, revenues from "normal" park activities (camping, cabins, parking, etc.) have increased by almost \$2.3 million (40 percent) due to the combination of increased visitation, opening of new facilities and park fee increases. Parks have also become increasingly successful with "park operated concessions" (merchandise, food, swimming, etc.). These activities now generate gross revenues of more than \$3.3 million and provide an important source of funds for equipment and improvements to snack bars, stores and swimming areas.

Information on parks

One key to getting people to appreciate and enjoy Virginia's State Parks is providing them with information about facilities and activities. When asked to identify the reasons for not using state parks, respondents of the 2006 VOS identified lack of information (31 percent) and other reasons (21 percent). The predominant written comment was lack of time and location of parks being too far away (20 percent).

The use of the Internet has proven to be a popular source of information on state parks. According to the 2006 *Your Comments Count* survey, the most common source of information was the Internet (20.8 percent), followed by friends (18.9 percent). General park information and availability of program offerings can be updated more frequently on the DCR website than with printed publications. Also, the ability to make cabin and camping reservations on the Internet has expanded options for potential park users. Efforts should continue to expand online reservation capabilities to include other facilities, program offerings and activities. In 2007, electronic information kiosks were placed in each park. Visitors can use a touch screen to identify program offerings at the park, access and print trail maps, obtain information on local businesses, and additional information about the park setting. The system also provides information on Virginia's other state parks.

Future state parks needs

DCR has continued efforts to acquire and protect significant natural and cultural resources and to meet recreational needs. The selection of a state park site is based on several areas of consideration. Certain basic criteria needs to be met for a potential site to qualify for acquisition as a state park, such as the size of the tract, the presence of a significant natural or cultural resource or its proximity to a recreational lake or river. Specific criteria for state parks are referenced in Appendix C.

The official methodology for identifying the need for additional land for state parks is based on the national standard for state parks, initially developed by the National Recreation and Parks Association, which is 10 acres of state park land per 1,000 people. This standard has been used in Virginia since 1999 in response to a legislative directive to develop an overall standard for Virginia State Parks. Based on this standard and projected population growth of 7.8 million people (based on the 2000 Census), there will be a need for more than 12,000 acres of additional state

park land by 2010. By 2020, the state's population is expected to increase by more than one million, creating additional demands on the available facilities and a need for almost 20,000 additional park acres.

The northern Virginia and Hampton Roads planning districts have the greatest populations and the least available and affordable land for state parks. Addressing unmet state parks needs in these areas will remain a challenge for the foreseeable future. Acquisition targets in these two planning districts will need to be considered in areas outside the district, but that are accessible to the public who live in these regions. For example, land for one future park has already been acquired in Stafford County that could serve a portion of the Northern Virginia region. Efforts to meet additional demand for state park lands in other regions of the Commonwealth will also need to continue (see Table IX-3).

Another consideration for identifying additional park land and facilities is the amount of time a user would be willing to spend in getting to a site. At the time the state released *Virginia's Common Wealth* in 1965, the goal was to have a state park located within an hour's drive of major population centers. While coming close to achieving this goal, other factors now appear to impact Virginians' ability to access state parks. In the 2000 and 2006 VOS, the travel distance from home and a lack of time ranked as the second and third reasons for not going to a state park. In the future, consideration may need to be given to acquiring state parks within a half hour to hour travel time from major populations, in part because of rising automobile fuel costs.

In the process of developing the 2007 *Virginia Outdoors Plan*, the public identified several areas as desirable locations for future state parks:

- Augusta County, Grottoes Area
- Clarke, Frederick, Loudoun counties
- Charlottesville region - Rivanna, Tye or Mechum rivers
- Chesapeake Bay counties – Middle Peninsula, Northern Neck
- Eastern Shore (ocean side)
- Hanover County - North Anna, Pamunkey rivers
- Henry County - Mayo River
- Highland or Rockingham County
- James River (east of Richmond)

- Mecklenburg and Brunswick counties - Lake Gaston
- Northern Piedmont region - Rapidan and Rappahannock rivers
- Sussex County - Nottaway River
- Tazewell County

During the next five years, DCR anticipates focusing state parks acquisition efforts on completing the Middle Peninsula Park, continuing negotiations on the Augusta County Grand Caverns site, and further investigation of the possible acquisitions in Hanover and Henry counties and in Southern Virginia.

Table IX-3. Virginia State Parks Acreage Need Based on 10 Acres per 1,000 People

Planning District	2010 Population	Acres Needed	Current Supply	Surplus / (Deficiency)
LENOWISCO (PD1)	90,700	907	1,103	196
Cumberland Plateau (PD2)	112,700	1,127	946	(181)
Mount Rogers (PD3)	194,100	1,941	8,087	6,146
New River Valley (PD4)	173,300	1,733	583	(1,150)
Roanoke Valley-Alleghany (PD5)	271,400	2,714	250	(2,464)
Central Shenandoah (PD6)	276,788	2,768	4,243	1,475
Northern Shenandoah Valley (PD7)	211,900	2,119	2,586	467
Northern Virginia (PD8)	2,181,000	21,810	2,390	(19,420)
Rappahannock-Rapidan (PD9)	160,600	1,606	1,860	254
Thomas Jefferson (PD10)	228,600	2,286	53	(2,233)
Virginia's Region 2000 (PD11)	242,399	2,424	1,053	(1,371)
West Piedmont (PD12)	251,200	2,512	4,537	2,025
Southside (PD13)	87,900	879	5,368	4,489
Commonwealth (PD14)	105,100	1,051	3,124	2,073
Richmond Regional (PD15)	989,500	9,895	9,483	(412)
George Washington (PD16)	318,800	3,188	6,448	3,260
Northern Neck (PD17)	53,500	535	2,127	1,592
Middle Peninsula (PD18)	91,800	918	431	(487)
Crater (PD19)	168,699	1,687	1,930	243
Accomack-Northampton (PD22)	53,700	537	536	(1)
Hampton Roads (PD23)	1,629,200	16,292	9,096	(7,196)
	7,892,886	78,929	66,234	(12,695)